



JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF
CALIFORNIA
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE
OF THE COURTS
Public Information Office
455 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94102-3688
www.courtinfo.ca.gov

415-865-7740

Lynn Holton
Public Information Officer

NEWS RELEASE

Release Number: 75

Release Date: **December 15, 2005**

New Survey Released Today on California's Juvenile Dependency Courts

Despite Huge Caseloads, Progress Noted in State Courts That Monitor Abused and Neglected Children

San Diego—The most comprehensive study of its kind on juvenile dependency courts in California will be released today at the Beyond the Bench XVI conference, a statewide educational meeting for the juvenile justice system sponsored by the Center for Families, Children & the Courts of the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC).

California's dependency courts handle approximately 90,000 open cases each year involving abused and neglected children.

Despite huge caseloads and challenging federal timeliness guidelines, the dependency courts have made substantial progress in providing legal representation to children throughout their cases, the study found. In addition, judges, commissioners, and referees are now highly experienced in dependency court proceedings and receive a great deal of continuing education.

The study surveyed hundreds of judicial officers, attorneys, court and child welfare administrators, parents, children, and volunteers as part of the AOC's Dependency Court Improvement Program. Major findings include:

- **Legal representation:** Nearly all children in dependency courts in California have legal representation throughout the trial court action, unlike the situation in 1997.
- **Judicial experience:** Many judicial officers hearing dependency cases are highly experienced and educated in dependency proceedings, and most receive a good deal of continuing education in the field.

(over)

- **Collaboration:** Most courts, judicial officers, and court staff are substantially engaged in collaborative efforts with the local child welfare system.

Challenges facing dependency courts include the following, according to the study:

- **Delays in hearings:** Courts struggle to meet state and federal guidelines for timeliness of hearings. Many participants in the study, including judicial officers, attorneys, and parents voiced great frustration with hearing delays.
- **High caseloads:** Average caseloads for judicial officers are far greater than any caseload standards for dependency that have been recommended by national policy-makers or the AOC.

The study also suggests that further improvement is needed to achieve safe and permanent placements for all children in dependency. Some key recommendations follow:

- **Develop a strategy for collaboration** with the child welfare system and other partners, including a statewide commission on dependency court improvement.
- **Create a self-assessment process** for local courts that allows them to measure their progress and target areas for court improvement.
- **Pilot key elements** of the National Council of Family and Juvenile Court Judge's *Resource Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse & Neglect Cases* to reduce delays and improve the effectiveness of dependency hearings.
- **Develop a statewide automated case management system** that provides the reports and performance measures required for effective case management.
- **Develop new dependency attorney performance standards** and provide the resources and training to implement them.

The *California Juvenile Dependency Court Improvement Program Reassessment* is available on the California Courts Web site at www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc.

#

The Judicial Council is the policymaking body of the California courts, the largest court system in the nation. Under the leadership of the Chief Justice and in accordance with the California Constitution, the council is responsible for ensuring the consistent, independent, impartial, and accessible administration of justice. The Administrative Office of the Courts carries out the official actions of the council and promotes leadership and excellence in court administration.